On Nietzsche and the Psychology of Trauma

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You find out soon enough
You should not speak with death
For it is useless knowledge

CHARLOTTE DELBO (1970)

"What is it in us really that wants 'the truth'?" Nietzsche asked – and granting that, "*why not rather* untruth? – and uncertainty? – ignorance even?" [BGE 1]. Perhaps there is no question today of greater import (and yet less often debated) than this one. Alfred North Whitehead once suggested that the history of philosophy is nothing but a series of footnotes to Plato. This may well be true. Certainly, it says something of Plato – and yet so much of our 'philosophy' seems the plaything of one or another systemized set of presumptions – an exercise in various denials. It is in this light that Nietzsche arrives as a welcome exception. To my mind, he begins to ask the right questions. What is it in us that wants the truth, and, granting that, how can we even trust ourselves to know? – to want to know? – to be *willing* to know? – to be *able*?

Where did we get this idea that truth would be without cost or consequences, harmless to behold? So often we have *assumed* that truth would be universally 'verifiable', that knowledge can be 'objectively' transmitted, that these do not require of the knower some *fundamental* transformation from within. We have assumed, in other words, that knowledge doesn't have an emotional or spiritual price. In contrast, Nietzsche says: "A thing might be true although it were harmful and dangerous in the highest degree; indeed, the basic constitution of existence might be such that one would be destroyed by a complete knowledge of it – so that the strength of a mind might be measured by how much 'truth' it could endure" [BGE 39].

If truth is unbearable, untruth, therefore, *functions. Untruth,* therefore, may well be only natural: "with all the value that may adhere to the true, the genuine, the selfless, it is possible that a higher and more fundamental value for all life might have to be ascribed to appearance, to the will to deception" [BGE 2]. Thus, one must ask: to what extent do our norms and traditions – traditions in part because they have proven themselves to function – function

precisely by virtue of their inherent untruth? 'The game', as R.D. Laing once said, may well be 'the game of not seeing that we are playing the game' (Laing 1970: ##).

While no doubt fascinating in the abstract – these epistemological inquiries take on a life and death immediacy under less benign circumstances. 'The game' has a more critical reality. However Nietzsche may have come by them, most of his questions (and indeed, the very tensions and contradictions implicit in his thought) lie at the heart of what clinician Judith Herman has come to call "the dialectic of psychological trauma." This "dialectic" represents a frightening, yet none the less predictable, set of existential conditions encountered by "rape survivors and combat veterans … battered women and political prisoners … the survivors of vast concentration camps created by tyrants who rule nations and the survivors of small, hidden concentration camps created by tyrants who rule their homes" (Herman 1992: 1). It is the telltale sign – the unmistakable mark, as it were – of what we least want to see, least want to hear, and least want to address or acknowledge.

The dialectic of psychological trauma revolves around two antithetical poles: "the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud . . .

> The psychological distress symptoms of traumatized people simultaneously call attention to the existence of an unspeakable secret and deflect attention from it. This is most apparent in the way traumatized people alternate between feeling numb and reliving the event. The dialectic of trauma gives rise to complicated, sometimes uncanny alterations of consciousness, which George Orwell, one of the committed truth-tellers of our century, called "doublethink," and which mental health professionals, searching for calm, precise language, call "dissociation" (47).

Thus, an ongoing tension between Nietzsche's 'unbearable truth' and a 'functional deception' all but defines the 'disorder' posttrauma. Furthermore, "since neither the intrusive [truth] nor the numbing [function] symptoms allow for integration of the traumatic event ... the dialectic ... is therefore potentially self-perpetuating" (47). "Eternal Recurrence" and "overcoming" under these circumstances take on a deeply personal connotation. The parallels between Nietzsche's perspectives and those inherent in posttraumatic aetiology are tantalizing, if unspoken. Perhaps ironically, the year 1889 – the very year that Nietzsche lost his sanity –

also stands as the date Pierre Janet published *L'Automatisme Psychologique,* the book that coined the term "dissociation" and the first book to overtly address psychological trauma.

1. RAGE

Traumatic experience makes one aware of immorality in a way that nothing else possibly could. It almost inevitably "involves understanding, at a deep experiential level, that one's terror and pain were intentionally caused by another ... [One is] forced to acknowledge the existence of evil and the possibility of living in a morally bankrupt universe" (Janoff-Bulman 1992: 78).

In concert with this resonates Nietzsche's philosophic agenda: both his relentless questioning of conventional assumptions, and even more primarily, conventional values. He is concerned with the so-called 'death of God', with the rising tide of nihilism, with the failures of our norms, with "how much hypocrisy, indolence, ... how much falsehood is concealed under the most honored type of contemporary morality" [BGE 212]. In these regards, Nietzsche is so strident, passionate, and emphatic that he often comes across like a madman or a raging prophet. However, his hostility to the traditional social order is *very* acute, and as Richard Bernstein has since observed:

> Some form of relativism seems to be a consequence of [his] lines of inquiry ... Nietzsche himself thought of such a relativism as a form of nihilism, the prevailing sickness that was spreading throughout Western culture and that he explored with such acuity. Yet it is a deeply troubling and perplexing question whether Nietzsche shows us any way out – any way to escape the nihilism that is so characteristic of modernity (1983: 14).

Bernstein is, I think, essentially right. However, intellectual loyalty to the mores and concerns of the prevailing social order is a luxury enjoyed primarily by those who have never been *mortally betrayed by them*. Nietzsche's paradox – his trail of "deeply troubling and perplexing" questions – takes on very different interpretations depending upon one's experience of (or relation to) said social order. In confronting these questions, one would do well to remember that it is a *presumption* that the traditional social order and the traditional Christian mores are not already *functionally* relative, and at that in a deeply malignant way. Thus,

Nietzsche's self-professed "immoralism" – his "Revaluation of all Values" – could well be an attempt to reassert (or a call to reestablish) an *authentic moral order*. Nietzsche's own perspective concerning these matters is clear and unequivocal: Christian morality all but *equals* nihilism: "the will to nothing sanctified" [A 18].

> I *condemn* Christianity. ... The Christian Church has left nothing untouched ... it has turned every value into an un-value, every truth into a lie, every integrity into a vileness of the soul. Let anyone dare to speak to me of its "humanitarian" blessings! To *abolish* any distress ran counter to its deepest advantages; it lived on states of distress. It *created* distress to externalize *itself* [A 62].

Grant the overall legitimacy of Nietzsche's indictments (for the sake of argument, if nothing else), and the Revaluation becomes nothing less than "a courageous becoming conscious" [WP 1007]. The infamous *Ubermensch* (Overman) would therefore be one who has become strong enough to confront the situation honestly, and thus, having no need of recourse to denial, one who could *evaluate* honestly. "In other words," as Walter Kaufmann succinctly put it, "Nietzsche believed that, to overcome nihilism, we must first recognize it" (1974: 110).

2. WE

We cannot respond to what we will not acknowledge, or do not recognize, and we often have little reason to do either. It is not difficult to comprehend the deep cognitive and social rupture created by random, malevolent experience. Like the Greeks before us, with their *cosmos* over *chaos*, we *believe* in order on a very deep-seated level. The world is simply not seen as a random, malevolent, or meaningless place. In this respect, we are all inherently and unrealistically optimistic. Even if we verbally recognize the possibilities, we seldom acknowledge the realities, and we virtually never believe that we, personally, will be affected. As Janoff-Bulman has rightly observed, "Whether or not one accepts the existence of a deeper universal terror lying beneath our fundamental assumptions, the human tendency to perceive the self as indestructible and invulnerable remains the same" (1992: 19).

These matters have serious import, both philosophically, as Nietzsche clearly discovered, as well as in the realm of psychological trauma. "Every instance of severe traumatic psychological injury is a standing challenge to the rightness of the social order" (Judith Herman, quoted in Shay 1994a: 1) To confront such realities is inevitably to call into question not only integrity and trustworthiness of that social order, but also the security of one's own metaphysical assumptions. It is much easier to simply "believe." As Nietzsche extensively argued, "we have fixed a world for ourselves in which we can live by *assuming* [italics mine] ... [and] without these articles of faith [beliefs] nobody now could stand life" [GS 121].

Granting the state of affairs portrayed here leaves one confronted with immediate and *serious* consequences, ethical foremost of all. *When* we have powerful motives not to listen or to deny the truth that confronts us, "events take place outside the realm of socially validated reality" (Herman 1992: 8). The world is thus *divided*. Consciousness (both individual *and* social) is likewise split asunder, and with that we arrive back at our point of departure: locked in silence, unable to respond, and back in the dialectic of psychological trauma.

3. THE HISTORY OF AN ERROR

The shape of this world we have fixed for ourselves – this socially validated reality – did not come about overnight. The ideas and presumptions which are for us today so normative as to be invisible (or sacred) are perhaps to a large extent innate in us by our very nature. Nonetheless, they do have a past and comprise an inheritance. "Not only the reason of millennia -- the madness of millennia too breaks out in us" [Z I, 22]. Questions, even the ones we generally choose to ignore, have been with us throughout our long history.

> Controversies as fresh as whether to admit to the possibility of post-traumatic personality changes ... go back to ancient roots. ... Plato (*Apology* 41d) has Socrates say, in his famous defense before the court that condemned him to death, 'nothing can harm a good man either in life or in death,' and again in the *Republic* we hear extensively argued that the good person cannot be harmed by the world. For Plato, the notable quality that a good man has is inextricably bound up with good breeding, in a particular aristocratic lineage. By the time we get to the Roman Stoics however, this possibility of unshakeable goodness, now called virtue, has been democratized so that even a slave could possess it, having acquired

> it by good upbringing in childhood. In this form Christianity took up the idea and clothed it with the doctrine of God's grace. By the late 18th century, it had been set in stone by Immanuel Kant, who said that which is truly deserving of ethical praise, blame, or true moral worth cannot be augmented or diminished by fortune. In the 20th century, psychoanalysis offered us as a 'scientific' result what the culture had already embraced, that no bad events could shake good character, once formed in childhood. ...
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> Plato's contemporaries [however] thought of him as a crank, not a philosopher, a word they reserved for the tragic poets like Sophocles, Euripides, Aeschylus, and above all, Homer. All of the tragic poets presented the destruction of good character by external events, particularly betrayal and bereavement. Among those whom subsequent ages also called philosophers, Aristotle undercut Plato's position most powerfully, although there are times that Aristotle appears to endorse it and people argue and argue about where he really stood (Shay 1994b: ##).

Nietzsche refers to this normative canonization of Plato's Socratic vision as "the death of tragedy." It is worth note that the ethical ideals of Neitzsche's 'revaluation' are markedly Aristotelian (albeit, a *pre-Christian* Aristotelian), and beyond that clearly pre-Socratic.[1] Even in his earliest work, the fundamental concerns are already forming:

> Consider the consequences of the Socratic maxims: 'Virtue is knowledge; man sins only from ignorance; he who is virtuous is happy.' In these three basic forms of optimism lies the death of tragedy ... now the transcendental justice of Aeschylus is degraded to the superficial and insolent principle of 'poetic justice' with its customary *deus ex machina* [BT 14].

Now, while one could argue that Nietzsche was here mistaken (tragedy being not literally dead; history in the particulars being far more complex), the point might well be misguided. Nietzsche was ever a poet. While this is arguably both his greatest strength and his greatest weakness philosophically; metaphorically, the death of tragedy may have been just that: a critical and fundamental shift in the consensus understanding of the human condition.

Nietzsche clearly had no time for a 'just world' theory and considered the ongoing appeal of Plato's metaphysics (particularly as manifest in Christianity) to be both dishonest and socially dangerous – the "history," as he put it, "of an error" [T II, 7]. "It is suffering that inspires these conclusions: fundamentally they are *desires* that such a world should exist ... to imagine another, more valuable world is an expression of hatred for a world that makes one suffer" [WP 579]. Thus, as Martha Nussbaum nicely paraphrased it, Nietzsche believed that

"the very things that the negating metaphysician most anxiously tries to eliminate – change, risk, transience – are themselves partly constitutive of the highest human values" (Nussbaum 1986: 463). Order at any price inevitably entails deception. How we, by our natures (and this includes philosophers), would like the world to be and the actual conditions under which we live are two *very* different matters:

> All that philosophers have handled for millennia has been conceptual ... Death, change, age, as well as procreation and growth are for them objections – refutations even. What is, does not *become*; what becomes, *is* not. Now they all believe, even to the point of despair, in that which is. But since they cannot get hold of it, they look for reasons why it is being withheld from them. 'It must be an illusion, a deception which prevents us from perceiving that which is: where is the deceiver to be found?' – 'We've got it,' they cry in delight, 'it is the senses! These senses, *which are so immoral as well*, it is they that deceive us about the *real* world. ... Moral: denial of all that believes in the senses, of all the rest of [human]kind: all of that is mere "people" ... And away, above all, with the *body*, that pitiable *idee fixe*[2] of the senses! infected with every error of logic there is, refuted, impossible even, notwithstanding it is impudent enough to behave as if it actually existed! [T II, 1].

Nietzsche asserted a world where untruth *functions*: a world where what we *know* is profoundly swayed by what we most need to hold dear. Morality for Nietzsche (and in this I think he was correct) therefore ultimately means *surrendering* to the truth (including the truth of the *body*) no matter where it might lead, no matter how inexpedient it might be, and no matter *how unkind*.[3] As he once wrote in *Zarathustra,* "Let us speak, you who are wisest, even if it be bad. *Silence is worse; all truths that are kept silent become poisonous* [italics mine]. And may everything be broken that cannot brook our truth!" [Z II, 12].

These few brief lines should strike a distinctly familiar chord with anyone currently working in the field of posttraumatic psychology, whether it be with sexual violence, political terror, or combat. In and of themselves, they may well comprise the *only* moral imperative by which the dialectic of psychological trauma can *ever* be genuinely confronted, if not overcome.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

There are terrible questions – adrift, as it were, in the tension between truth and despair – in our collective peripheral vision. I could not begin to adequately confront them here, provided

I were even able. I am not at all certain they have answers. But in any event, that was never my intention. If the reader should have caught sight of them – a glimpse, at least, of their existence – then I will consider my efforts successful.

As a philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche is dangerous, although not, I think, for the reasons usually given. To bear witness to realities that no one is willing to recognize or acknowledge – realities that threaten the very shape of our world and its order – is to risk public condemnation, censure, and isolation. Nietzsche's censure and subsequent isolation are now legendary, and even today the public condemnation has never ended. Under different circumstances, I suspect audacity the likes of Nietzsche's would be lauded as courageous. As it stands, he has been and continues to be – to use his own words – "misunderstood and for a long time thought the ally of powers he abhors" [UM III, 4].

If I am right about Nietzsche, our readiness to embrace certain presuppositions about him is anything but coincidental. Most of what I present here can probably be easily and effectively dismantled: interpreted away as merely the product of juxtaposition and selective quotation. And perhaps this is so. Nietzsche has proven, after all, to be notoriously easy to take out of context. My intuitions here will doubtless never be proven. But should they be correct, I hope we will one day see finished what Friedrich Nietzsche has started.

Traumatic events call into question basic human relationships. They breach the attachments of family, friendship, love, and community. They shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others. They undermine the belief systems that give meaning to human experience. They violate the victim's faith in a natural or divine order and cast the victim into a state of existential crisis.

JUDITH HERMAN (1992)

Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever. Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget those things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never.

ELIE WIESEL (1958)

Whither are we moving? ... Are we not straying as though through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? ... God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him."

Here the madman fell silent and looked again at his listeners ... "I come too early," he said then; "my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way ... deeds, though done, still require time to be seen and heard."

NIETZSCHE (1882)

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[UM] *Untimely Meditations*. 1873-6.
[GS] *The Gay Science*. 1882.
[Z] *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. 1883-5.
[BGE] *Beyond Good and Evil*. 1886.
[T] *Twilight of the Idols*. 1888.
[A] *The Anti-Christ*. 1888 (published 1895).
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[1] Kaufmann, 382. "The position of the allegedly Heraclitean and irrationalistic Nietzsche is to be found – superbly formulated – in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*: 'the good man ought to be a lover of self, since he will then act nobly, and so both benefit himself and aid his fellows' ... Aristotle's *megalopsychia* [Greatness of Soul] ... apparently made a tremendous impression on Nietzsche, whose opposition to Christianity can scarcely be seen in proper perspective apart from Aristotle's ethics."

[2] *Idee fixe*. [Fr. obsession (fixed idea)] – another phrase associated with none other than *Pierre Janet*, who used the term to describe the distinct, voiceless, and unyielding nature of posttraumatic recollection: what some contemporary psychologists have since come to call "*body* memory."

[3] This conviction is a constant with Nietzsche from beginning to end, e.g., a letter to his sister, written while still a young man in 1865: "Is it decisive after all that we arrive at *that* view of God, world, and reconciliation which makes us feel most comfortable? ... Do we after all seek rest, peace, and pleasure in our inquiries? No, only truth – even if it be the most abhorrent and ugly (cf. Kaufmann, 23).